

# Contrastive topics in Chinese comparatives

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## 1. Introduction

Mandarin Chinese has been claimed to be a Topic-Prominent language (Li and Thompson 1976). This seminal proposal has been extensively studied in a variety of constructions of Chinese. However, much of the research on Chinese topicalization has focused almost exclusively on declarative sentences. In this paper we would like to investigate not typical topicalization but contrastive topicalization attested in comparatives in Chinese.

Comparative constructions in Chinese occur with the comparative morpheme ‘bi’, which is equivalent to ‘than’ in English. The comparative marker ‘bi’ has been traditionally treated as a coverb, which introduces a NP/DP like a preposition. Therefore, from syntactic perspectives, Chinese comparatives can have a configuration of phrasal comparatives rather than clausal comparatives, whereas English comparatives are divided into both phrasal and clausal comparatives (Xiang 2005, Erlewine 2007, Lin 2009). However, a recent investigation of Chinese and Korean comparatives has showed that, unlike Chinese, Korean has clausal comparatives on top of phrasal ones (Jhang 1994, Lee 2002, Park 2009, Park 2010, Choe 2011, Park 2018, Park and Liu 2019).

(1) Chelswu-nun [nay-ka sayngkakha-yss-ten kes]-pota te khu-ta.

Chelswu-Top I-Nom think-Past-Adn thing-than more big-Decl

‘Chelswu is bigger than I thought.’

(2) Chelswu-nun [Yenghuy-lul Yengswu-ka salangha-nun kes]-pota te salanghan-ta.

Chelswu-Top Yenghuy-Acc Yengswu-Nom love-Adn thing-than more love-Decl

‘Chelswu loves Yenghuy more than Yengswu loves her.’

(3) Chelswu-nun [nay-ka sayngkakha-yss-ten kes]-pota te mescin salam-ita.

Chelswu-Top I-Nom think-Past-Adn thing-than more nice person-Decl

‘Chelswu is a better person than I thought.’

(4) Na-nun [Yenghuy-ka tolpo-n kes]-pota te manhun hwancatul-ul

I-Top Yenghuy-Nom take care of-Adn thing-than more many patients-Acc

tolpo-ass-ta.

take care of-Past-Decl

‘I took care of more patients than Yenghuy took care of.

(Park and Liu 2019)

The examples (1)-(4) show that Korean comparatives can be associated with clausal comparatives, in which ‘pota’ combined with the ‘kes’ clause introduces the standard of comparison. As argued by Park and Liu (2019), however, the prepositional subordinator ‘bi’ in Chinese comparatives can be associated not only with phrasal comparatives but also with clausal comparatives. In this paper, we would like to argue that Chinese comparatives can be divided into both phrasal and clausal comparatives, and that Chinese comparatives are structurally built based on the contrastive topic strategy.

## 2. Chinese comparatives

Chinese comparatives can be associated with clausal comparatives.

(5) qu bi [bu qu] hao.

go than not go good

‘Going is better than not going.’

(6) zuo huoche bi [zuo feiji] man.

sit train than sit airplane slow

‘Taking a train is slower than taking an airplane.’

(7) ni jiang bi [ta jiang] geng hao.

you speak than he speak even-more good

‘You speak better than he.’

(Li and Thompson 1981)

Notice that all the examples in (5) through (7) provide compelling evidence that ‘bi’ comparatives are analyzed as having a clausal comparative. Here, the ‘bi’ comparative part is adjoined to a predicate as an adjunct. It is noteworthy that in all of these cases the ‘bi’ comparative part has a structurally parallel relation with the target in the subject or topic position. ‘Qu’ and ‘bu qu’ in (5), ‘zuo huoche’ and ‘zuo feiji’ in (6), and ‘ni jiang’ and ‘ta jiang’ in (7) have a parallel relation with each other. At the same time, note that in these examples, the targets such as ‘qu’, ‘zuo huoche’, and ‘njiang’ in the main clause are analyzed as

occupying a typical topic. In keeping with Lee (2003), we would like to suggest that the targets in Chinese comparatives convey contrastive topic construal, structurally occupying the position that contrastive topics fill.

### 3. Comparatives as a contrastive topic in Chinese

Lee (2003) suggests that Chinese ‘-ne’ shows an explicitly expressed or listed contrast between the two elements of the same type. He further argues that ‘-ne’ functions as a contrastive topic marker in Chinese. In the same vein, the targets in Chinese comparatives that do not involve ‘-ne’ can be treated as representing a contrastive topic.

(8) xiang bi xiong bizi chang.  
elephant than bear nose long  
‘Elephants have longer noses than bears.’

(9) a. \*wo xihuan gou bi mao.

I like dog than cat

b. \*wo gou bi mao xihuan.

I dog than cat like

c. \*gou bi mao wo xihuan.

dog than cat I like

d. wo xihuan gou bi [wo xihuan mao] xihuan de duo.

I like dog than I like cat like DE much

‘I like dogs better than cats.’

(Li and Thompson 1981)

In (8) the target ‘xiang’ is the topic in the sentence and compared with the standard ‘xiong’. (9a), (9b), (9c) are all unacceptable because the object NP/DPs are not placed in contrastive topic position, and therefore are unable to serve as the standard/target of comparison in the respective sentences. When the object is accommodated in a comparative construction as in (9d), it needs to be part of a clausal comparative; in this case, the main clause itself is placed in contrastive topic position, simultaneously placing the comparative clause in the same position.

### 4. Diagnostic tests for a contrastive topic in Chinese comparatives

A *-(n)un*-marked NP in Korean can function as the topic of the sentence. But in some cases, it can receive a topic reading or a contrastive topic reading (Han 1998), as in (10).

(10) John-un Mary-lul coaha-n-ta.

John-Top Mary-Acc like-Pres-Decl

‘John likes Mary.’ [topic reading]

‘John likes Mary.’ (Frank likes Susan, and Peter likes Laura.) [contrastive topic reading]

The sentence in (10) is ambiguous between a topic reading and a contrastive topic reading. Under a topic reading, the sentence just means that John likes Mary. However, under a contrastive topic reading, it presupposes that there are other people besides John in the domain and the entity denoted by ‘John’ functions as one topic among alternative possible topics. For example, let’s assume that there are Frank and Peter besides John. If Frank likes Susan and Peter likes Laura but John likes somebody else different from the person who Frank and Peter like, this situation belongs to the contrastive topic reading.

We propose that comparatives can be used as a contrastive topic marker in Chinese although there are no overt topic markers such as Korean *-(n)un*. According to Badan and Gobbo (2011), the left periphery of Chinese is organized as in (11).

(11) Aboutness Topic > Hanging Topics (HT) > Left Dislocated ones (LD) > *lian*-Focus > TP

They also point out that the position of HT and LD is for contrastive topics in Chinese. If this is the case, Chinese contrastive topic should be placed before focus constructions. Xu (2006) makes a distinction between topic and focus in preverbal position as follows:

(12) a. Ta shi putaojiu he pijiu bu he.

he FOC wine and beer not drink

‘It is wine and beer that he doesn’t drink.’

b. Ta shi putaojiu bu he.

‘It is wine that he doesn’t drink.’

(13) a. Putaojiu he pijiu, ta bu he.

wine and beer he not drink

‘Wine and beer, he does not drink.’

b. Putaojiu, ta bu he.

‘Wine, he does not drink.’

(14) a. Ta putaojiu he pijiu bu he.

he wine and beer not drink

b. Ta putaojiu bu he.

(12a) does not logically entail (12b) since (12a) with a focus marker ‘shi’ has an exhaustive reading whereas both (13a) and (14a) entail (13b) and (14b) respectively. Thus the focus-marked NP in (12a) has the feature complex of [+contrastive], [+exhaustive] but the sentence-initial topic NP in (13a) and the NP between the subject and the verb in (14a) have the feature complex of [+contrastive], [-exhaustive]. Hence we can call (12a) ‘focus construction’ and (13a) or (14a) ‘topic construction’. In the same vein, the position between contrastive topic and focus in the preverbal position in Chinese is represented in (15a).

(15) a. √ [ Contrastive Topic > Focus ]

b. \* [ Focus > Contrastive Topic ]

(16) Zhangsan bi Lisi xihuan Mali.

Zhangsan than Lisi like Mali

‘Zhangsan likes Mari more than Lisi does.’

(16) might have a contrastive topic reading in line with Han (1998) in that it presupposes that there are other people besides ‘Zhangsan’ in the domain and the entity denoted by ‘Zhangsan’ functions as one topic among alternative possible topics. With these ideas in mind, let’s take two tests for a contrastive topic in comparatives in detail.

First of all, Badan and Gobbo (2011) assume that weak crossover effects occur only with focus whereas topicalization lacks them.

(17) a. Wo de jiaren, baba<sub>i</sub>, wo zui xihuan t<sub>1</sub>.

I DE family-people father I most like

‘Of my family members, it’s my dad who I like the best.’

b. Wo de jiaren,            baba<sub>i</sub>, [piping ta<sub>i</sub> de ] ren    hai    hen xihuan t<sub>1</sub>.

I    DE family-people father criticize him DE people still    very like

Int.: ‘Of my family members, it’s my father who the people that criticize him still like him.’

(18) KTX<sub>i</sub> bi gaosubashi taoyan ta<sub>i</sub>    de ren    ye    jingchang zuo t<sub>1</sub>.

KTX than express bus hate pronoun DE people also often    ride

‘KTX is more often used than the express bus to people who hate it.’

Second, two types of Foci cannot cooccur because the focalization of two elements is excluded (Benincà 1988, Rizzi 1997) whereas topics can.

(19) \*Zhangsan CHI le    YI GE PINGGUO.    (Foci)

Zhangsan eat    PERF one CL apple

Int.: ‘Zhangsan ate (not cut) an apple (not a banana).’

(20) Cong zhe jia yinhang<sub>i</sub> ti/wei Zhangsan<sub>j</sub> wo zhidao women    (Multiple Topic)

From this CL bank    for    Zhangsan I    know we

keyi jiedao hen    duo    qian.

can borrow very much money

‘From this bank, for Zhangsan, I know we can borrow a lot of money.’

(21) xiang    lian bizi    dou    bi    xiong    chang.    (Topic + Focus)

elephant Lian nose all    than    bear    long

‘Elephants even have longer noses than bears.’

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that comparative constructions in Chinese can be divided into both phrasal and clausal comparatives as their English counterparts are, and that Chinese comparatives can be accounted for as a contrastive topic marker. In order to prove this, we tested two features: weak crossover effects and two types of foci.

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